

Poll shows deepening crisis of Australian Labor government amid social distress

Oscar Grenfell
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A poll conducted by Resolve and reported by the *Sydney Morning Herald* yesterday underscored the increasingly dire predicament of the federal Labor government and the entire official political set-up. The figures confirm the immense gulf between ordinary people and the major parties, which has also been starkly expressed in recent by-elections and in the Tasmanian state election.

The polling indicated that Labor's primary vote has fallen from 32 to 30 percent over the past month. That is a decline, even compared with Labor's 2022 federal election result, when it received just under a third of all first-preference votes, its lowest result since the 1930s. Labor was only able to scrape into office because of the implosion of the Liberal Party, which also received one of its worst vote shares in history and lost a number of seats.

The further fall in Labor's vote has not been accompanied by any substantial boost to the opposition Liberal-National Coalition, with its primary vote only increasing from 35 to 36 percent. The Coalition is led by Peter Dutton, a widely reviled right-wing figure, who remains behind Labor's Anthony Albanese in the two-party preferred prime minister figures.

According to Resolve, with preferences factored in, Labor and the Coalition's vote is neck and neck. If the numbers held in a federal election, due to be held by May 2025, that would result in a hung parliament, raising the spectre of a minority government dependent on support from crossbenchers to remain in office.

That is a scenario that big business commentators have been warning against for months. Such an unstable government, constantly facing the threat of losing a parliamentary majority, could obstruct the agenda being demanded by the ruling elite, for an intensification of austerity measures and an ever greater diversion of resources to the military, amid advanced preparations for Australia to participate in a US-led war against China.

Declining support for the government is not a one-off, but has been recorded in eight of the past ten Resolve polls. There are undoubtedly a number of factors, but this poll

particularly highlights the impact of the deepening social crisis, centred on the cost-of-living.

Fifty-five percent of all respondents said they would struggle to pay with an unexpected major expense, even if it were only a few thousand dollars. That figure was greatest, at 65 percent, among low-income workers earning less than \$50,000 a year. It was 57 percent among all renters.

Asked to identify two issues of greatest concern, 55 percent of respondents named grocery prices and 37 percent utility prices, making them the top preoccupations.

Similar sentiments were expressed in response to a question asking participants to name a single measure they wished to be included in the May budget. Some 24 percent called for policies to place downward pressure on inflation and interest rates, 20 percent said they wanted energy bill relief and 20 percent advocated investment in housing supply.

In 2022, Labor scraped into office on the basis of phony pledges to deliver a "better future," including vague gestures towards reversing social hardship. As soon as it formed government, however, Labor insisted on the need for ordinary people to make "sacrifices" and pledged to the financial elite to enforce "budgetary restraint."

As part of soaring prices globally, annual inflation reached a peak of 7 percent in March 2023. For the past two years, electricity bills have increased by an average of 20 percent or more each year, with sharp rises among other utilities. Increases to the prices of basic groceries have consistently outpaced inflation.

Labor, together with the entire political establishment, backed 13 interest rate rises by the Reserve Bank of Australia. Mortgage repayments have climbed, in an assault against working people aimed at slowing the economy to boost unemployment and prevent any wages' push.

Over the three years to December, wages have fallen by an average of 5.1 percent compared to the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and 6.1 percent in the public sector.

Average weekly mortgage repayments have increased by \$400 since May 2022, more than eight times the average

increase in wages. As a result, the number of Australians “at risk” of mortgage stress has doubled in less than two years. Almost one third of owner-occupied mortgage holders are now in this category, the highest level since the global financial crisis.

In the year to June 2023, average rents for apartments soared by 26 percent in the capital cities, and by 12.7 percent in the year since. The Anglicare Australia Rental Affordability Snapshot, released today, found that there is not a single listed property that is affordable for someone on the government’s youth allowance payment and just three out of around 50,000 affordable for someone on Newstart unemployment benefits.

Along with rejecting any meaningful increase to those sub-poverty-level payments, Labor has stared down calls for broader cost-of-living relief. At the same time, it has imposed significant cuts in funding to public hospitals and schools, which are already suffering their worst crisis in history.

That has gone hand-in-hand with the dismantling of the last COVID safety measures, in partnership with Labor administrations in the states and territories. The last wave, over the summer period, claimed more than a thousand lives as a direct consequence of this profit-driven “let it rip” agenda.

The Resolve polling does not appear to have examined the impact of Labor’s support for the Israeli genocide in Gaza. But there is no question that Labor’s backing of the continuous mass murder has produced substantial shock and opposition, registered in weekly mass demonstrations that have spanned more than six months.

Last month, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation published an article by Patricia Karvelas, which reported concerns in Labor circles that its alignment with the genocide could contribute to the loss of “safe” seats in the working-class suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne. Karvelas wrote: “[T]he idea that the electoral territory is all stitched up is deluded according to some of the hard heads in the party. Some fear the threat of a community independent is real.”

Some of the sharpest swings against Labor in the 2022 and 2019 federal elections were in working-class seats. That trend was continued in two state Queensland by-elections in March, with Labor’s vote falling by around 30 percentage points to less than 35 percent in the impoverished Brisbane seat of Inala and by about 15 percentage points, also to around 35 percent in Ipswich West.

In last month’s Tasmanian state election, the primary vote for the governing Liberal Party plummeted by a quarter, but Labor gained only 1 percentage point, taking its primary vote to about 29 percent from a near-record low of 28

percent in 2021. That resulted in the reinstatement of a minority Liberal government.

The Resolve polling underscores the fact that these recent results are not localised phenomena, but are replicated at the federal level.

Labor continues to signal that it will impose the dictates of the financial elite, with the lead-up to its May budget dominated by warnings of a downgrading of growth forecasts necessitating further cuts to social spending. At the same time, Labor last week unveiled a \$50 billion increase to military spending over the decade, on top of record expenditure already above 2 percent of annual GDP. That is to deepen Australia’s transformation into a frontline state in the US-led war drive against China, which includes the commitment to develop a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines at a staggering cost of \$368 billion.

The Labor government is on a confrontation course with the working class, amid the deepening social anger, while the political instability is set to continue and deepen.

The collapse in Labor’s support is not a conjunctural development, but expresses a rupture between this party of capitalist rule and its previous base in the working class. This has been developing for decades, especially since Labor dispensed with its program of limited national-reformism in the 1980s, under the pressure of globalisation, and became the chief enforcer of a continuous offensive against jobs, wages and working conditions. Today, Labor is a party of the banks and the billionaires, with no mass base among workers.

The critical issue, though, is what will fill the political vacuum. A socialist leadership must be built in the working class, to take forward the fight against the program of war and austerity of Labor and the entire political establishment.



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